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An advisor's year-end playbook: Client deadlines, firm strategy and finishing strong
By Rob Burgess
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There are just days left until 2026 begins, giving advisors little time to tie up loose ends before the calendar flips over.

Many of these time-sensitive items have to do with clients' taxes, retirement accounts and charitable contributions. But other equally important items on to-do lists are focused on individual firms' internal culture and goal-setting.

Experts say it's just as important to finish strong as a business as it is for the individual clients themselves.

Closing the loop on client needs before year-end
On the client side, the most important year-end items are the ones tied to Dec. 31 deadlines, such as reviewing tax-loss harvesting opportunities, handling required minimum distributions (RMDs) and completing Roth conversions.

At the end of the year, Samantha Mockford, associate wealth advisor with Citrine Capital in San Francisco, said her firm calculates fourth-quarter estimated tax payments. Employees who receive equity compensation are especially vulnerable to surprise tax bills if they do not make estimated payments, since reserved stock unit vests are often underwithheld, she said.

By December, many trades have already been placed, so it's a great time to do tax-loss harvesting, said Mockford.

"We see if we can take advantage of overweight positions or asset classes to harvest any gains or losses," she said. "We have to be mindful of wash sale rules when buying back into a similar security."

For retirement accounts, the end of the year is an ideal time to rebalance, aligning accounts back to their target portfolio allocations, said Mockford. If a client owns their own business and has a solo 401(k), the employee part of their contribution must be completed by the end of the calendar year, she said.

Mark A. Johnson, investments and portfolio management fellow at Wake Forest University School of Business, said firms also should make sure clients are positioned correctly for backdoor Roth contributions, especially when the pro-rata rule requires certain IRA balances to be addressed before the end of the year.

While IRA contributions can be made up until the April tax deadline, Roth

conversions are bound by the calendar year, he said.

"This is why advisors prioritize them in December, if they have not been completed earlier, to avoid missing the window," he said.

Opening donor-advised funds and making donations and grants takes time, so it's best to start those in October or earlier, to leave plenty of buffer time before the end-of-year deadline, said Mockford. In addition, if any clients did a backdoor Roth contribution by making a nondeductible IRA contribution to an empty IRA, then doing a tax-free Roth conversion, then all pretax IRAs must be emptied by the year's end, she said

Some clients experience higher net paychecks at the end of the year because they've maxed out deferrals, such as 401(k) contributions, health savings account contributions and employee stock purchase plan deferrals, said Mockford.

"Some of these clients might like to invest this excess," she said. "If that's the case, then we would [transfer] that cash and invest it for them," she said.

The downtime when clients are less available to meet is a great time to check assigned model portfolios for all accounts, said Mockford.

"We make sure accounts are all assigned to a model portfolio agreed upon alongside the client after discussing risk tolerance, investment philosophy and time horizon," she said. "If it's been more than a few years since last administering a risk tolerance questionnaire and having those investment conversations, then we make a note to address that at our next progress meeting."

Taking time to unplug and refocus

While client-facing tasks are essential in the waning days of the year, firms should not neglect their own needs.

Even as his firm tackles year-end client requests, Bryan Gum, founder of Lighthouse Planning in Kansas City, Missouri, said some of the most important year-end work happens internally.

"We build in time for a weeklong strategic retreat where we step out of day-to-day client work and focus on the business itself, refining our vision for the coming year, clarifying major themes, tightening systems and road-mapping the first six months of initiatives," he said.

This retreat is a chance to slow down and think deeply, said Gum.

"The goal of the 'break' is to make sure the business we're building is in alignment with the life we want to live and not a thing that pulls away from our ideal life," he said.

Since Mockford's firm is fully remote, an annual tradition of theirs is a team Zoom "party." Some wear tacky sweaters or accessories, and they play some games and talk about their lives outside of work, she said.

"Our boss usually sends everyone a gift basket of goodies, and we all give thanks for the team and the work," she said.

Beyond that, Gum said his firm intentionally pushes anything nonessential into the new year.

"December is a tempting time to force last-minute projects across the finish line, but I've learned that some decisions deserve space and fresh energy in the new year," he said. "We model for clients what a non-panicked holiday season looks like by trying our best to live it ourselves. We prioritize rest, reflection and meaningful work over frantic year-end scrambling. It's become a powerful way to reconnect with our mission before heading into a new year."